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ABSTRACT

Empowerment is based on the viewpoint that power shared is power multiplied. It contributes to increased school effectiveness by providing people with the opportunity and necessary resources to understand and change their world. The interactive processes by which people empower each other and benefit from them are discussed in this report. Suggestions are offered to facilitate empowerment at the different levels of participation: administrator, teacher, parent, student, community, school district, and individual school. (LMI)

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A NEW LOOK AT empowerment

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How educators and communities can empower each other

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"The goal of teachers and administrators should be to seize the opportunity to make something significant happen for their students. Through empowerment, fundamental change —that 'something significant'—will take place."

—A Public School Teacher from the Northeast

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A NEW LOOK AT empowerment

Empowerment!

To some, this word—so popular in today's school reform efforts—conjures up visions of power struggles.

There is another view of empowerment—people working together to empower each other. This vision is based on the recognition that power shared is power multiplied.

This publication is about empowerment—what it is and how to create it. It is designed for school administrators, teachers, parents, citizens and students who want to find answers to these questions:

- How does empowerment work?
- How can empowerment be fostered?
- How do empowered people feel and act?
- What are the benefits of empowerment for teachers, administrators, students, parents and the community?

The Power of Empowered People

"Empowerment gives people the opportunity and necessary resources so they can believe, understand and change their world," noted Joseph F. Lagana, associate executive director, Allegheny Intermediate Unit, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Empowerment makes schools more effective places for learning because empowered people:

- Use their insights and experience to make better decisions.
- Have the flexibility and support to try new approaches and custom-fit what they do to meet the needs of schools and students.
- Learn and grow on the job.
- Work together to solve challenging problems. Empowerment creates "team spirit" among administrators, teachers, students and citizens.
- Believe that improved instruction is everyone's responsibility.

How Do Empowered People Feel and Act?

One teacher noted, "You can tell you're in an empowered school just by walking through the halls. There's an unmistakable energy and feeling of professionalism."

Empowered people share a number of positive characteristics. They generally:

- Appear challenged and committed.
- Are open to change.
- Are confident of their ability to achieve—and help others achieve.
- Upgrade their knowledge, skills and effectiveness through professional development.
- Model positive, constructive behavior for colleagues and students.
- Find personal satisfaction in their own success—and the success of others.
- Respect the worth of every individual.

People who feel empowered are often among the most highly regarded individuals in their school—whatever their official job title. Colleagues and students are likely to turn to them for advice and encouragement. They are good at what they do, but they are always looking for ways to improve.

Two Sources of Empowerment

There are two types of empowerment: **organizational** empowerment, which is reinforced by policy and management procedures; and **personal** empowerment, which is a product of individuals themselves.

ORGANIZATIONAL EMPOWERMENT— A PART OF MANAGEMENT

Many schools are creating management structures that empower people by keeping them well-informed and involved in decisions. These structures for "empowered schools" have several names, including site-based management, school-based management, shared or school-centered decision-making, vertical or horizontal teaming and decentralized management. All assume that those involved in **making decisions** will also feel more responsible for **making decisions work**.

Organizational empowerment usually starts with the superintendent, principals and the school board, propelled by encouragement from teachers and the community. Organizations that are set up to empower people usually ensure regular involvement by a broad range of people both inside and outside the school.

Of course, policies and structures alone are not enough. But they do make the point that everyone's voice deserves to be heard. They send a strong message that, "This is how we do business."

"Within each of us is the ability to create an organization of our own choosing."
—Peter Block, *The Empowered Manager*

PERSONAL EMPOWERMENT— AN INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY

Personal attitudes can override even the most well-written policy—or overcome barriers to empowerment. Ultimately, people who feel empowered believe, "I can make a difference."

How can you become empowered? Start by using the power you already have. Personal and professional development, a healthy attitude, good communication skills and a willingness to take risks are good places to begin.

Personal and Professional Development

Knowledge and skills are power, and personal and professional development can be keys to empowerment. To develop your skills and increase your knowledge, you can:

- Read about current education theories and research.
- Attend workshops or take classes in the subjects you teach or in subjects that interest you.
- Develop a formal or informal network for sharing ideas and information with colleagues.

A Healthy Attitude

Question: What is the most contagious thing in the world? **Answer:** An attitude!

An empowered "can-do" attitude, coupled with knowledge and effective communications skills, can lead to positive change. To cultivate a healthy attitude, you can:

- Acknowledge your personal strengths.
- Recognize yourself as a true professional.
- Believe there is always something new to learn.
- View most problems as challenges for which solutions can be found. When problems defy solutions, the healthiest attitude may be to seek ways to manage them.

For some people, it is easier to find reasons *not* to take responsibility. A teacher might say, "It's no use. The administrators have boxed us in with rules." An administrator might lament budget constraints, state mandates or restrictive board policies.

A mark of an empowered person is a tendency to offer constructive alternatives or solutions rather than constant criticism, knowing full well that not every idea can or will be accepted. A truly empowered person will persevere and work with others to make education even more effective for students.

Communication: The Root of Empowerment

Communication can empower individuals *and* organizations. Sharing information, feelings and goals ultimately builds a sense of community within a school or school system. You can practice empowering communication by:

- Keeping everyone informed about ideas and suggestions that may be successful in educating students.
- Encouraging new ideas and efforts.
- Building trust by keeping your word and openly discussing concerns.
- Planning projects with others in your school or district.
- Showing respect by listening attentively to others.
- Offering and welcoming constructive criticism or suggestions.
- Forming a network with others to hear and offer new ideas.
- Sharing knowledge and skills.
- Reducing isolation, which can inhibit trust and empowerment.

The Benefits of Listening—One Teacher's Experience

"In all my years of teaching, I had never seriously engaged in exchanging ideas with colleagues at my school. Then, I had an opportunity to take part in a professional development program for excellent teachers from other schools in my area.

"During the course of the program, I came to cherish the opportunities to listen and share ideas with these new colleagues. In the process, I learned to listen. Up to that time, even though I hate to admit it, I'd been so intent on making my own opinions heard that I couldn't hear what others were saying over the sound of my own voice.

"I returned to my school with a personal commitment to listen to my fellow teachers, administrators, students and parents. I discovered that not only did I benefit from the ideas they shared with me, but my relationships with them were bolstered because I sought their opinions.

"By listening, I've gained the influence I had always hoped for among my colleagues and the administrators, because now they, in turn, are listening to me."

Risk-Taking

The willingness to take personal and professional risks is a characteristic of empowered people. People who take risks gain new insights about themselves, stretch their limits, test their mettle, solve problems and meet challenges. As a result, they grow in self-assurance and are better able to empower others.

Schools and school systems can encourage constructive risk-taking by listening to and, as often as possible, supporting new ideas. One idea is to set up an uncomplicated system for making suggestions—and ensuring that each suggestion receives prompt and thoughtful attention. The process might include a basic outline of the proposal, the resources needed, the benefits that might be gained, and an indication of how the idea generator thinks the project should be evaluated or measured. Some school systems offer grants to support staff ideas, and help staff members who want to apply for outside grants.

Just as empowered people take risks, they should also support others in risk-taking. When people feel they can try new ideas, receive encouragement, and be defended—not punished—for honest mistakes, creativity and innovation are likely to flourish.

Taking the Initiative

Here's how the road to empowerment worked for one teacher:

"I noticed that classroom teachers too often see themselves *only as classroom teachers*—in school forever. That can lead to burnout. To avoid it, I moved outside the usual area of teacher activities.

"I made it a point to get involved in professional activities. I read journals, joined professional organizations and developed and presented papers.

"I began to realize that I had a genuine contribution to make to education. I was learning new things and gaining new perspectives.

"One of the best results of my initiative was that I began to feel more professional. Every step I've taken has made me a better, more confident teacher. All those experiences and all that learning flow directly to kids. By empowering myself, I also empowered others."

Empowering Each Other

Schools Empowering Their Communities

Schools and those who work in them are a reflection of the communities they serve and a source of community pride. The accomplishments of students and local educators help form an attitude about "the kind of community we really are."

Many schools empower their communities when they or school staff:

- Model the belief that all people deserve respect.
- Provide early childhood education and child care facilities for those who need them.
- Offer classes to citizens who want to broaden their knowledge and skills.
- Listen to parents and the community through parent-teacher conferences, surveys, parent and community meetings and personal visits—and pay attention to what they say.
- Get involved in service organizations, coalitions and community improvement groups.

> *"There's only one reason to go through this: for the development of human beings."*
> —Superintendent, Colorado

Schools Empowering Parents

Most educators know that parents play a significant role in helping their children learn. By empowering parents, schools gain:

- Partners in education.
- Advocates for the schools and the concerns they face.
- A corps of volunteers, including new sources of skills and talents.
- Shared parental and school insights into children's needs.
- New ideas.
- And much, much more!

One example: Underwood Hills Elementary School in Omaha, Nebraska, developed special pledges for parents, teachers and students. An excerpt from the parents' pledge reads: "I will remember I am the most important model in my child's life and diligently strive to be worthy of that position. I will take a genuine interest in my child."

How can a school empower parents?

- Share with parents school objectives and how school staff are working to achieve them.
- Discuss parents' goals for the educational, social and emotional development of their children. When schools and parents agree on these goals, students do better.
- Let parents know early on if their children are having trouble in school, so they can help remedy the situation.
- Keep parents informed about school issues and activities. Newsletters, meetings, conferences, telephone calls, retreats, videotapes, 24-hour hotlines and cable television are just some of the ways schools communicate with parents.
- Let parents know their help is needed and think of ways that all parents can contribute. If necessary, use translators and hold meetings outside the schools to make the meetings more accessible to parents.
- Offer parent-teacher conferences at times parents can attend.
- Offer parents training in subjects they ask for. Courses can range from helping kids with homework, to dealing with adolescence, to basic literacy.

Teachers Empowering Students

Teachers have the power to help students gain knowledge and develop skills and talents that will benefit them the rest of their lives. If you are a teacher, how can you empower students?

You can:

- Help them discover that their effort affects their learning. Try a variety of techniques—cooperative learning, flexible and individualized homework assignments, or encouraging outside reading, for example.
- Involve them and give them skills in making decisions. When students are meaningfully involved in making decisions on issues that affect them, they can learn more about the process of democracy and develop problem-solving skills they will use throughout their lives.
- Teach them that responsibility goes hand-in-hand with decision-making. In school, set clear limits on student behavior. Out of school, encourage students to take part in service projects to see how their behavior influences others.
- Encourage them to tolerate diversity and appreciate creativity. Plan learning activities that involve students with different interests and backgrounds. As students work together and learn from each other, they can recognize the valuable contributions each has made to the common goal.

An educator from the Northeast noted, "I've observed that empowered teachers model for their students that they can make a difference. This, in turn, diminishes student apathy."

Communities Empowering Their Schools

Parent and community support is essential if schools are to be fully successful in educating students. Without the financial, material, human and moral support of the community, schools have an uphill battle.

Most communities that have good schools openly show they want them and are willing to support them. As a parent or citizen, how can you empower the schools in your community? You can:

- Learn more about issues confronting schools—ranging from making our work force more competitive to helping poor, non-English speaking or otherwise disadvantaged students; to restructuring the schools; to providing values education; to recruiting and retaining excellent staff.
- Work with the schools to solve problems. Find out from teachers and administrators what you can do to help your schools become even more effective.
- Volunteer to help at school. Join and participate in your local parent-teacher organization. Organize and serve on committees or coalitions devoted to working constructively with the schools.
- Pay close attention to your school board. Study the qualifications of those aspiring to the board. Support those you think are most devoted to good education. Encourage someone to run for the board—or run yourself. And don't forget to vote!
- Help the schools get the financial support they need to maintain a sound education program for all students.
- Hold high expectations for the schools. Every child can learn.
- Frequently express your appreciation to all who work in the schools and encourage others to follow your lead.

Principals Empowering Teachers and Staff

As leaders in their schools, principals know that their success and the success of their schools depends on dedicated, enthusiastic, knowledgeable and productive teachers and staff. And they know that creativity flourishes only if it is encouraged.

If you are a principal, how can you empower teachers and other staff? You can:

- Keep everyone well-informed about school and district issues, concerns and procedures. Involve teachers in discussing budget, staffing, curriculum and other issues.
- Encourage innovative teaching techniques.
- Ask and observe how things are going and provide help and advice as frequently as it is needed.
- Provide opportunities for teachers to talk with each other about educational concerns and teaching techniques.
- Consult with staff about the types of professional development they need and then provide it, along with necessary

> *We need to do away with release time. It's dangerous because it says to the public: This is not the work that needs to be done.*
>
> —Robert McClure
> National Education
> Association

time. Make sure teachers have the opportunity to think, plan, share and learn from each other as a regular part of their workday.

- Encourage staff members to share with others what they have learned from professional development opportunities.
- Praise teachers and do everything possible to elevate the teaching profession.
- Provide technology for teaching and classroom management, along with adequate training and technical support.
- Ensure that supplies are available and in working order.
- Be accessible. Schedule regular formal and informal two-way communication with staff.
- Delegate responsibility to give teachers an opportunity to demonstrate their leadership in and out of the classroom.
- Help staff members succeed. Be tolerant, sympathetic and helpful when they make mistakes.
- Encourage teachers to use the expertise of central office administrators and staff.
- Create opportunities for teachers to share their ideas districtwide.
- Promote a healthy school climate in which people enjoy what they do and are recognized for the contributions they make to the school and their community.
- Promote understanding and support of staff efforts by focusing public attention—through newsletters, the news media, special ceremonies—on outstanding work.

Pittsburgh's Instructional Teacher Leadership Teams

Almost half of new teachers leave before the fifth year of teaching. Salary is only part of the explanation. Many districts have launched programs to reverse this trend. For example, Pittsburgh selected 15 percent of its teaching staff to become Instructional Teacher Leaders. These teachers are relieved of some of their teaching and nonteaching duties in order to serve on a school-based instructional cabinet and to act as peer counselors. Thus, veteran teachers are empowered to help others—and new teachers are provided with the support they need to stay in the classroom.

Superintendents and Other Central Administrators Empowering Schools

Effective leaders are like symphony conductors, bringing out the best in every musician, while blending talents to produce magnificent music. As one educational leader explained: "A superintendent wears many hats: human engineer; landscape and relationship assessor; planner, facilitator and visionary; experimenter, risk taker, catalyst and model; team builder and coach; people builder and challenger; and chaplain and reality therapist."

Other central administrators and staff also play key leadership roles in the schools. They are valuable sources of information and are respected, experienced and talented professionals.

If you are a superintendent or central office administrator, how can you empower schools? Many of the suggestions that apply to school principals also apply to all central administrators. In addition, you can:

- Involve staff in developing a vision for your schools.
- Recognize all school staff members as professionals who are dedicated to helping students learn.
- Support innovation and risk-taking. Show you understand that improvement takes time.
- Ask principals and teachers for their suggestions on how to improve the schools.
- Hold high expectations—and fight for the resources required to meet those expectations. It may be as simple as getting a copy machine repaired. . .or as complex as changing a state

regulation. See it as your job to remove obstacles to school improvement.

- Listen. Regularly set up informal meetings to hear "how the system really works."
- Focus public attention on the accomplishments of students, teachers and other school staff.
- Be visible. Visit schools and classrooms to see successes—and challenges—firsthand.
- Establish school-based management systems that allow individual schools a strong voice in budget, personnel and other decisions that bear on education.
- Share the spotlight. Give credit to staff when good things happen. Let the community know the pride they should take in the high-quality staff of their schools.
- Remove roadblocks to getting needed supplies, ranging from paper to computers, and ensure responsiveness to maintenance concerns.
- Promote professional development for *all* staff.

School Boards Empowering School Systems

School boards are policy-makers and they have a profound effect on empowerment. School board members can discourage risk-taking and inhibit a sense of empowerment. On the other hand, they can reinforce the efforts and decisions of all school staff members by creating a climate in which people are allowed to take risks, are given time and resources to be successful, and are recognized for their accomplishments.

Together with superintendents, school boards help define the "big picture" in their schools. However, that "big picture" has meaning only when others share the dream and are empowered to pursue it.

Roadblocks to Empowerment

The road to empowerment can be bumpy. Uncertainty by teachers and administrators can lead to a reluctance to take part. Dealing with reluctance and overcoming fears may be important first steps in empowering staff and community. The reluctance and fears may be based on:

- Feelings that "empowerment" is just another buzzword or fad.
- Skepticism based on doubts that the school system is sincerely committed to empowerment.
- Reluctance to accept additional responsibility without additional pay.
- Fear of failure or, for some, fear of success.
- Reluctance to give up autonomy and the comfort of the routine.
- Lack of time.
- Dislike of frequent meetings.
- Discomfort over new roles that may be required.
- Feelings of powerlessness—a sense that "what we do won't make any difference anyway."
- Concern that others may not carry their weight.

In education, the focus of any change should be on improving student achievement. When staff and community are empowered, a team spirit develops. Improved instruction becomes "my responsibility, too."

In sharing power with others, some feel they are giving up long-held authority or autonomy. They are, instead, increasing their power: because power shared is truly power multiplied.

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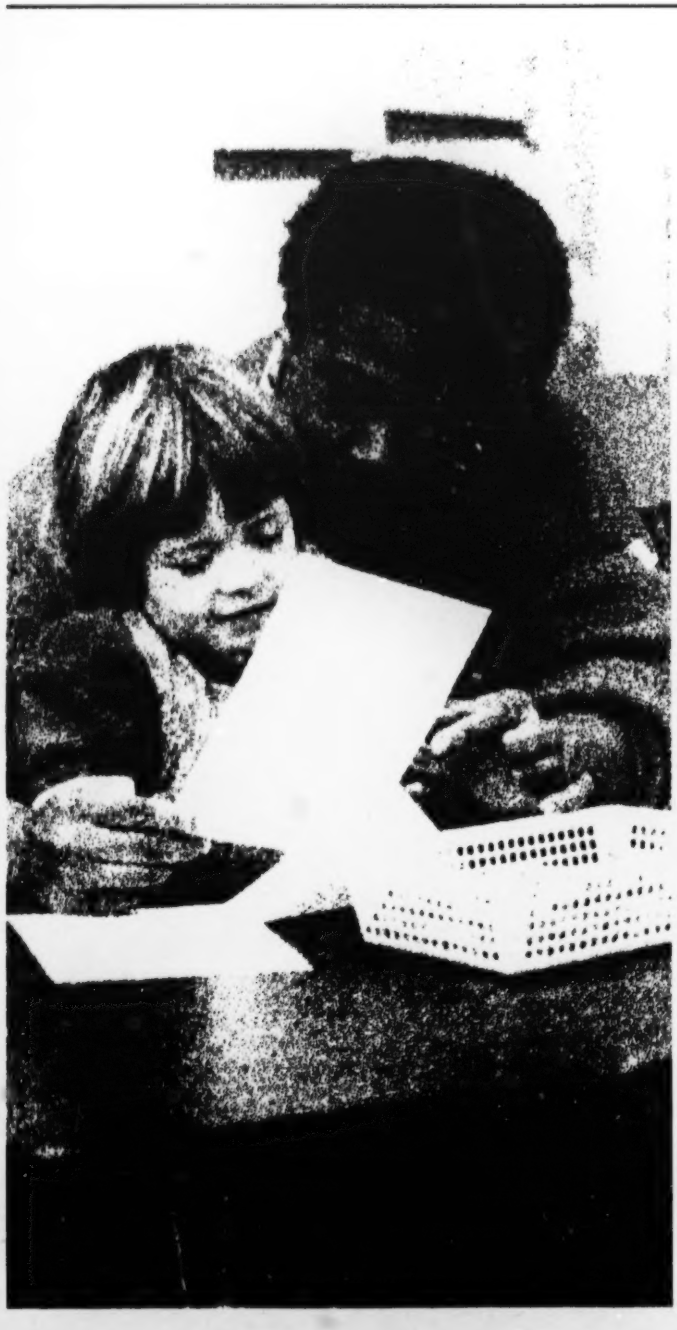

"A school tomorrow isn't going to look like the school where you or I went. If we are really going to have the learning that needs to take place, we need to empower teachers, administrators, parents and students to help put that school together so it can concentrate on the human talent that is there."
—Donald W. Ingwerson, superintendent Jefferson County Public Schools Louisville, Kentucky

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